

Part I

1755-1905

Private Collections



From the library of Edward Moseley

“I give to my Dear wife *Blomes History Of the Bible* in folio...and all the Books of Physick.” So willed attorney Edward Moseley at his death in 1749.

Moseley housed a collection of 400+ volumes between libraries at his residence in Rocky Point and his office in Brunswick Town.

Moseley and other book collectors such as William Hooper, Wilmington Revolutionary statesman and signer of the Declaration of Independence, maintained libraries for private use.

Volumes from both their collections are housed in the rare book collection at the New Hanover County Public Library.

Church Collections

“Indeed, my Lord,” the Reverend Richard Marsden, rector of St. James, wrote in 1735, “it would be a great act of charity without delay to supply this part of the province at least with good books.”

In 1755, the first shipment arrived for the St. James and St. Philips Parishes from the English Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.

Religious treatises, Bibles and prayer books made up the bulk of the collection, although it probably included some volumes on philosophy, law, history, literature and grammar.

An Early Lending Library

The only pre-Revolutionary circulating library in North Carolina was the Cape Fear Library, which operated from 1760 to 1780. Little is known about the library, but it was probably supported by a group of educated men who shared in the purchase of books of interest to the group.

One volume remains at the New Hanover County Public Library: *Rollin's History of the Arts and Sciences of the Ancients*. The book, bound in leather, has **Cape Fear Library** stamped in gold on the cover.

Reading Rooms

During the first half of the 19th century, reading rooms established by newspapers, book stores, coffee houses

and debating societies became very popular.

Borrowers paid a yearly fee for the circulation of books, pamphlets and newspapers.

Wilmington's first known reading room was opened in 1808 by William Hasell, owner of the *Wilmington Gazette*.

In 1833, Thomas Loring, editor of the *People's Press & Wilmington Advertiser*, boasted of having 150 newspapers from 20 states in his reading room, which stayed open until 9:00 pm.

In 1836, William C. Jackson advertised that he would rent volumes from his bookshop for 6¼ cents per week.

Harper's Weekly



19th century reading room

Literary Groups

With the completion of the railroad in 1840 and improved access to the port, residents arrived from all parts of the United States as well as from other countries.

Debating societies, also known as lyceums and chataquas, were in vogue. The groups provided a forum for their members to read, speak, write and debate about the scientific, moral, religious and political issues of the day.

First Library Association

In 1849, the Wilmington Mercantile Library Association was created as a club to which members paid a yearly fee, purchased books and circulated them among themselves.

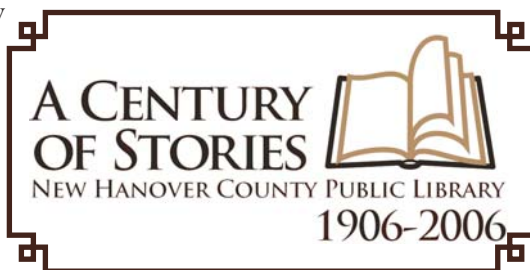
In 1855, the club was absorbed into the Wilmington Library Association. Organized before the Civil War, the Association became the town's leading literary center for the remainder of the 19th century.

In 1856, the city provided “lecture rooms” for a Public Library and Reading Room in the governmental complex which included City Hall and Thalian Hall. In 1858, the Wilmington Library Association moved its collection there from a building on Water Street and stayed open throughout the Civil War.

Civil War and Reconstruction

With the fall of Fort Fisher to Federal forces in January 1865, the future of the library became uncertain. The Freedman's Bureau appropriated the library rooms for its operations. Two years later, however, the books were back, and a complete catalog of the contents listed 1300 titles.

The move was short-lived. During Reconstruction it was decided that the Association, lacking a legal charter, had no right to exist on city property. By July 1872, the



Watercolor by Clayton Giles



An artist's conception of the colonial St. James Church



Wilmington City Hall c. 1870s